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Young People, Non-Religion and Citizenship: Insights from the Youth On Religion Study

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Abstract

Non-religion and unbelief are under-researched phenomena in the social sciences but the growing significance of the worldwide non-religious population is leading to more interest in this previously neglected topic. However, with the exception of a handful of studies, little attention has yet been directed towards non-religious youth, despite the emergence of a substantial body of research on youth and religion, and ongoing concerns about the conduct of young people more generally. This article draws on mixed-method data from the British Youth On Religion study to explore the responses of participants identifying as religious 'nones'. The analysis focuses specifically on young people as citizens through their relationships with wider society, including the broader meaning of non-religious identity, views on morality and values, and approaches to, and relations with, religious others. As such, the article speaks to wider debates about youth, citizenship and community cohesion, as well as non-religion and unbelief.

Key words: atheism, citizenship, morals, non-religion, unbelief, values, youth

Introduction

Non-religion and unbelief are under-researched phenomena in the social sciences but the significance of the worldwide non-religious population is increasingly recognised. As a consequence, recent years have seen a growing interest in this previously neglected group, understood as comprising a range of stances, including atheism, humanism and agnosticism amongst others. However, with the exception of a handful of studies, little attention has yet been directed towards non-religious youth. This is despite the emergence over the few last decades of a substantial body of research on youth and religion, an ongoing concern with the more general conduct of young people in society, including their role as present or future citizens, and an increasing number of young people identifying as religious ‘nones’ (e.g. 24% in the UK according to Ziebertz and Kay, 2006).

This article aims to help address the above gap by drawing on data from the British Youth On Religion (YOR) study to explore experiences and attitudes of those identifying as ‘religious nones’. In contrast to our previous work on this topic, which reported on individual characteristics and identities (Madge and Hemming, 2016), this article focuses on young people as citizens, through their relationship to their wider communities and society. This includes a consideration of their perceptions about the broader meaning of non-religious identity, their views on morality and values, and also their approach to, and relations with, religious others. As such, the article speaks to wider sociological debates about youth, citizenship and social cohesion, as well as contributing to the literature on non-religion and unbelief (see Hemming, 2017).

Non-religion and Unbelief

In 2011, 25% of the British population indicated on the Census that they identified as having 'no religion' and estimates derived from other surveys suggest that atheists, agnostics and non-believers account for between 31-44% of the UK population (Zuckerman, 2007). Recent research on non-religion has consistently documented the rise in the numbers of people identifying as non-religious in Europe, North America and the West over the last few decades (e.g. Hassall and Bushfield, 2014). Even beyond these contexts, non-religious people can be viewed as a significant population constituent. Tomlins and Beaman (2015:2) report a range of different estimates, including 10% (US CIA, 2012), 23% (Gallup International, 2012) and 16% (Pew Research, 2012) of the world's population identifying as non-religious.

Despite the worldwide significance of non-religion, social researchers have only recently begun to investigate topics such as non-religious identities, beliefs, practices and morality (e.g. Tomlins and Beaman, 2015; Zuckerman, 2007). Notably, there remains a significant gap in knowledge about childhood, youth and non-religion, even though academic interest in young religious lives has now begun to flourish (Hemming, 2017). There are some exceptions to this, including small-scale studies with non-religious young people (e.g. Catto and Eccles, 2013; Wallis, 2014), and larger scale national studies on youth and religion, which also provide insights into young religious 'nones' (e.g. Madge et al., 2014; Mason et al., 2007; Smith and Denton, 2005). However, it is clear that young people, non-religion and unbelief is a particularly under-researched theme within a wider neglected topic.

Progress in the field has been hindered by a number of factors, including a lack of clear terminology regarding non-religion and unbelief, as well as uncertainty about its relationship to religion. Stolz et al. (2016) outline a useful typology in this regard, distinguishing between

four forms of (un)belief: 'institutional', 'alternative', 'distanced' and 'secular'. The first two types – 'institutional' and 'alternative' - could broadly be described as religious or spiritual, constituting core members of formal religious communities or those who engage in more holistic and esoteric beliefs and practices. Those considered 'distanced' maintain a more ambivalent relationship to religion, perhaps associating on a cultural level and/or possessing certain beliefs, but not attributing it a very important role in their lives. Finally, 'secular' types do not participate in religious practices or beliefs but often maintain various philosophical stances.

Lee (2015) has proposed a definition of non-religion that is reasonably consistent with the 'secular' type of (un)belief outlined above. However, she suggests a distinction between the terms 'secular' and 'non-religion', arguing that the former refers to the declining significance of religion (the absence of something), whilst the latter can be understood as something more substantive (the presence of something else). Lee (2015: 32) defines non-religion as 'any phenomenon – position, perspective or practice – that is primarily understood in relation to religion but which is not in itself considered to be religious'. Despite this emerging scholarly understanding of non-religion as substantive in nature, not everyone who chooses the 'no religion' box on a social survey could necessarily be described as 'non-religious' in this sense. A number of studies with young people have shown that the meanings behind the 'no religion' label are multiple and fluid (Arweck, 2013; Wallis, 2014), often relating to a mixture of non-religious and religious beliefs and practices that frequently stray into the 'distanced' type of (un)belief outlined by Stolz et al. (2016).

In our own research, participants identifying as 'no religion' showed enormous diversity in their beliefs and religious activities: almost half the survey members mentioned some level of

belief in God and most of the interview participants pointed to some presence of religion in their lives (Madge and Hemming, 2016). Given we refer to the same sample of young people in this present article, the term 'non-religious' is used to denote religious 'nones' in this wider sense.

Youth, Citizenship and Social Cohesion

In contrast to the issues explored above, young people and their conduct as citizens has been at the centre of political and scholarly debate. Common themes have included the extent to which young people can be understood as political actors and the tendency for society to construct youth as a 'problem' in various ways (Côté, 2014). Such discussions are often contextualised within wider processes of societal fragmentation and declining participation in community activities in late modern societies (Putnam, 2000). Particular concerns are directed towards young people, with phrases such as 'broken society' representing political fears about the rise of antisocial behaviour and gang culture, linked to the perceived lack of direction amongst the young (e.g. David Cameron, 2010 speech).

It is often claimed that the above processes are related to the decreasing salience of Christian beliefs and values, participation in church communities, and the moral relativism, apathy and disconnectedness said to be a product of this decline (Doughty, 2007; Savage et al., 2006). Such claims tend to draw on wider stereotypes of the non-religious as lacking in morals and rejecting societal values (e.g. Harper, 2007). These assertions appear to be partially supported by certain studies with young people that report positive correlations between religiosity and life outcomes. For example, Smith et al. (2005) argue that religious teens fare better than non-religious teens when it comes to risk behaviours, media consumption, sexual activity,

emotional wellbeing, family relationships, morality, and community participation. Similarly, Mason et al. (2007) found that highly religious young people were more likely to possess civic attitudes, show high levels of social concern and be actively involved in the community. It is, however, unclear as to whether such benefits are a result of religion itself or rather the moral framework, learned competencies and social and organisational ties that are associated with religious organisational belonging (Manning, 2010).

In contrast, a range of research studies with adult atheists have shown that the negative stereotypes regarding morals and values have little empirical basis, with differences between the religious and non-religious mainly linked to specific doctrinal issues such as sex before marriage (Caldwell-Harris et al., 2011; Didyoung et al., 2013). Furthermore, non-religious young people in qualitative studies typically refute notions that they are amoral (e.g. Catto and Eccles, 2013) and may agree with many religious morals and values, even if they do not follow the wider religion (Wallis, 2014). The discrepancy between these two strands of research could be down to differences in how morality is defined and measured, but this is clearly an area that would benefit from further attention.

Closely linked with concerns about citizenship and social fragmentation is the issue of inter-faith relations. The importance of forging social cohesion within communities has been a central theme of British policy approaches to religious diversity (Forrest and Kearns, 2001; Robinson, 2005). The concept of social capital is often used to understand the processes involved, with a distinction drawn between bonding social capital amongst members of the same group and bridging social capital between members of different groups (Putnam, 2000), both of which are viewed as important for facilitating positive relations. Inter-faith dialogue and the promotion of tolerance and understanding for religious others are also regarded as

important. Recently, the focus of this debate has been widened, with scholars such as Woodhead (2016) highlighting the significance of the non-religious population in understanding and managing religious pluralism.

One possible consequence of poor relations between groups is discrimination and exclusion. A number of studies have considered the extent to which non-religious adults experience discrimination in the US, despite a lack of systematic research in this area. Cragun et al. (2012) found that 22% of their sample reported some form of discrimination, most frequently in social or family contexts, whereas at least 75% of participants in the Hammer et al. (2012) study had experienced a range of different types of discrimination, including witnessing anti-atheist comments in the media, being expected to participate in religious prayers against one's will and being told one's atheism is sinful, wrong or immoral. The literature also includes many anecdotal illustrations of discrimination, including job dismissals, death threats, physical violence, family rejection, and denial of employment, service and membership of community organisations (Cragun et al., 2012).

In the British context, reports of overt discrimination against non-religious people appear less commonplace. Mumford's (2015) non-religious participants felt they experienced a lack of status in comparison with their religious counterparts. This was linked to an awareness of the privileged position that religion maintains in British public life and a belief that the respect the non-religious were expected to extend to the religious was not always reciprocated. Interviewees were therefore reluctant to openly express their non-religious beliefs or atheist identity in family, work and other contexts for fear of negative reactions. However in contrast, the young British participants in the study by Catto and Eccles (2013) viewed themselves as part of the mainstream majority, constructing religious people as the minority. They were

much more likely to struggle in the context of personal and family relationships than experience discrimination at the institutional level.

Study Outline

The data for this article is taken from the Youth On Religion (YOR) study, which investigated the significance of religion for young people's lives in three urban, multi-faith locations of England: the London boroughs of Hillingdon and Newham, and Bradford in Yorkshire (see Madge et al., 2014). It involved young people from a range of faith backgrounds, including most numerous, Muslims, Christians, religious 'nones', Sikhs, Hindus and those of more than one faith. A mixed-method approach to data collection was adopted, comprising an online survey with 10,376 young people aged 11 to 17, face-to-face discussion groups and in-depth interviews with 157 young people aged 17 and 18, and e-Journal entries from a smaller number of participants.

The survey took place within school or college lesson time, and all pupils in the participating institutions were eligible to complete it, subject to feasibility and consent. The questionnaire covered a range of topics including the participant's background, attitudes towards religion, beliefs and practices in relation to religion, the impact of family, friends and other factors on religiosity, and views about the significance of religion within the community. While the survey participants were not necessarily fully representative of young people in the study areas, and are unlikely to be representative of those in more religiously homogeneous locations, the numbers are sufficiently large to make valid comparisons.

A qualitative sample of older pupils, attending the schools in which the survey had been conducted, took part in discussion groups and in-depth interviews on a voluntary basis. Discussion groups focused on religion in the local area and community, positive and negative aspects of religion, and the role of religion in education and society. The interviews sought to explore the survey themes in more detail, including aspects of participants' (non-)religious identities and biographies, how they impacted on daily life and inter-personal relationships, and factors that were important for shaping them. All data collected through these face-to-face methods were recorded, transcribed and analysed thematically. A small number of young people also kept e-Journals, documenting their views and experiences of religion, although data from this method does not feature here.

This article draws primarily on those young people within the YOR sample who described themselves, in one way or another, as being non-religious. Some reference is also made to those identifying with a religious faith for comparative purposes. In the survey, participants were given the option of ticking 'no religion' from a range of affiliations to mirror the Census. Of the total sample of survey participants, 19% (N=1,940) reported a 'no religion' identity. Prior to discussion groups and interviews, participants were asked to write down their religious status in their own words. Overall, 15% (N=24) of these young people fell broadly within the non-religious group. Participant quotes are labelled with pseudonyms, gender and stated (non-)religious affiliation, and also the extent to which they reported that religion was important in their life. Those in our 'no religion' sample were strikingly more likely than those with religious identities to be white and born in the UK (see Madge and Hemming, 2016).

The Meaning of Non-religious Identities

In order to explore young people's understandings of themselves as citizens, participants were asked about meanings they attached to their non-religious identities within their wider social contexts. Unsurprisingly, positive aspects came through most strongly and encompassed a range of personal benefits, such as greater freedom, the ability to believe what you liked and be open to different ideas and perspectives, to behave as you decide for yourself, to voice your own opinions, to determine your own moral and boundaries and make an independent judgement about right and wrong. Overall, the young people seemed to feel that they had a greater degree of agency within their lives without religion.

'A lot of people are very passionate about their religion, whereas I'm very passionate about not having a religion. So, and I think it benefits me a lot not having a religion in day-to-day life. And I think, if I did, I wouldn't enjoy life as much personally.' (BONO: female, atheist, religion not at all important)

'Well it really shapes who I am as a person. If I was more religious I'd have set out boundaries already. Whereas, being the way I am, I can set my own boundaries and things that I find are morally incorrect.' (PENNANCE: male, no religion, religion important in some ways but not in others)

Interestingly, the advantages of a non-religious identity were almost always explained with reference to how they differed from equivalent religious positions (see also Arweck, 2013). Participants talked about how being non-religious provided opportunities for experiences that might be frowned upon by religion, without the need to worry about being judged by God or attend places of worship regularly. Without a religious stance, it was claimed that mixing

with people from different backgrounds could be easier, and there was no need to defend your religion or argue about it.

‘I think with right and wrong, I think it’s more relaxed, because I know in religions you can’t eat some things, you can’t drink or smoke or something like that. And I think with atheists and daily life, I think you can kind of, you have more leeway with things you can do, obviously within the law. But, and I think you can just kind of really do what you want to do and have, as we said earlier, a lot more freedom in your daily life.’ (EDWARD: male, atheist, religion not at all important)

‘I’m not going to have this ultimate thing at the end where if I’ve been bad I’m going to be suffering for the rest of my eternal life, or if I’m good I’m going to go to this amazing place.’ (EMILY H: female, no religion, religion important in some ways but not in others)

Negative aspects of non-religion were mentioned much less often and many interviewees were unable to point to disadvantages. The most commonly made point was that non-religion might not be able to provide the opportunity to belong or feel part of a community in quite the same way as religion. There were no examples of young people in the qualitative sample who felt part of a wider non-religious network or community. Similarly, religion offered answers to ‘big questions’ and feelings of security in a way that non-religion might not.

‘The only thing I can think of is like questions about God that are unanswered... It’s like a question, and then you get the answer, and then there’s another question and another answer. It’s never ending. Whereas with religion it gives you that answer and

you've got to believe in that because that's your religion.' (ANNA: female, no religion, religion not at all important)

'I mean like you can't go to church to meet people, kind of thing like that. So I may be missing out on like people of a certain like religious belief who could be friends.'

(JACOB: male, atheist, religion not very important)

In the same way as the reported advantages of being non-religious, these disadvantages almost always reflected on the benefits of religion that the young participants felt they were missing out on, expressing the meaning of non-religion in relation to religion.

Perceptions on Morality

As was evident in the last section, morality and values featured significantly in the perceived advantages that young people associated with their non-religious identity. The YOR study was interested to investigate this topic further in order to contribute to the debate on morals, values and citizenship outlined earlier in the article. Rather than approach the issue through 'measuring' morality with all the challenges that entails, we instead sought to ascertain young people's views and perceptions, both quantitatively and qualitatively. Despite the negative stereotypes surrounding non-religion, our research found no difference between young people with and without a religious identity in terms of their professed commitment to understanding right from wrong and their wish to lead a positive life (see also Madge et al., 2014). Religious 'nones' were generally keen to refute what they saw as the prevailing assumption that you could not be moral if you were not religious, emphasising the equal value of non-religious morality.

‘I’ve never been religious and I don’t think I’m a bad person [...]. Everybody knows what is right and what is wrong and that’s just up you to choose which way you want to be.’ (KYLIE: female, no religion, religion not at all important)

‘I think if you don’t have a religion, you still have morals and you still have values and you still have things that you’re gonna stick to.’ (LOUISE: female, no religion, religion not very important)

Even when it came to more general outlooks on life, survey data showed that the majority of both religious and non-religious participants felt that having a purpose and direction in life was ‘quite’ or ‘very important’ (75.4%), as illustrated in Table 1. However, non-religious individuals (57.6%) were less likely to take this position than religious ones (84.3%). These figures compare well to the Mason et al. (2007) study, where the vast majority of participants said their life had meaning and purpose but non-religious young people were slightly less likely than other faith groups to report this.

[Insert Table 1 near here]

The main difference between the non-religious and religious groups in our study was the perceived origin of their morals and values. Table 2 shows that both groups in the survey viewed parents as most important for helping them to decide what is right and wrong (88.4% for religious and 83.6% for non-religious participants), but beyond this, the two groups diverged. Whilst the religious group tended to be strongly influenced by God and their faith (74%), the non-religious group viewed friends as the second most important influence. As

might be expected, religious young people also attributed importance to scriptures and religious leaders (63.6% and 56.8%) in a way that non-religious young people did not (9.2% and 7.4%).

[Insert Table 2 near here]

The lack of importance attached to religion for non-religious young people's morals and values was also reflected in the qualitative data. Here, participants emphasised the importance of parents, school, the law and wider society for influencing their morality. However, a number of scholars have noted how Christianity remains deeply entwined with contemporary British cultural and societal values (e.g. Davie, 2000) so religion was likely to play an implicit role in these wider influences.

'Because I haven't got a religious influence in my life, I think it's more society's influence. So you learn from society, from the laws, from ... just what society expects of you, that you know what's right and wrong.' (ALAN: male, no religion, religion not very important).

'I think it's through your parents and then through, you know, schools, and just sort of like the agents of social control – they sort of show you what's right and wrong.' (STUART S: male, no religion, religion not very important).

Another key feature of non-religious young people's morality emerged in participants' foregrounding of the self and individual decision-making for determining right and wrong. Morality was therefore viewed as less certain and universal and more open to discussion and

debate, supporting Mason et al.'s (2007) findings that non-religious young people are more likely than other faith groups to view morals as relative.

'I still have morals. Yeah like I think that something's right or something's wrong – it's not that religion's influencing that thought, it's just what I think is right or wrong. Like it doesn't have to be because I'm living by a set of rules or something, it's just my own rules.' (SIENNA: female, atheist, religion important in some ways but not others)

'The heaven and hell complex doesn't really work for me. I don't think "oh eternally this is gonna make me bad, its what's gonna make you bad and now how am I gonna react to this, what's gonna happen?". It's more just working out in my head what's good and what's bad.' (JIMMY: male, atheist, religion important in some ways but not others)

The reliance that non-religious young people placed on their own moral reasoning and influences such as family and wider society was also reflected in some of the survey data regarding specific issues. For example, Table 3 shows that religious 'nones' were much less likely than those with a religious identity to agree that their religious beliefs affect how they treat other people. Only 7.4% reported that religion influenced their approach to this issue 'quite a bit' or 'a lot', compared with 46% of their religious peers.

[Insert Table 3 near here]

Despite the lack of influence that religion had on motivating non-religious young people to treat other people in particular ways, there was nevertheless evidence from the qualitative

data of religious 'nones' taking part in activities that did help other people, such as charity appeals and volunteering.

'I've done numerous charity work for all different things. I did one, I did a charity organisation to raise money for Haiti.' (BONO: female, atheist, religion not at all important)

'I do participate in voluntary activities. There is a charity shop nearby and I often help out there and things like that.' (ZEBULON: female, agnostic, religion important in some ways)

In summary, findings from the YOR study showed that non-religious young people viewed themselves as 'good citizens' and were keen to refute the idea that they lacked morals or values. Where they differed significantly with their religious peers was in the perceived origin of their morals and values, with individual decision-making, family and wider society cited as more important than religious influences. As with the previous section, religion was an important reference point in explaining these non-religious positions. Our findings are, of course, based on young people's perceptions, rather than accepted quantitative measures of morality and life outcomes. However, they nevertheless offer important contributions as to the distinct ways in which non-religious young people understand morality.

Religious and Non-religious Relations

Relations between religious and non-religious groups are increasingly discussed in the literature on citizenship and social cohesion. One of the ways in which positive relations are encouraged is through contact between different groups. This stems from the famous 'contact

hypothesis' (Allport, 1954), which purports that association and communication between different groups can reduce prejudice between those groups, provided that certain conditions are met in order for contact to be positive and meaningful. These include equal status between groups, common goals, intergroup co-operation, personal interaction and the support of authoritative structures. Inter-group friendships are particularly important in this regard (Burch Brown and Baker, 2016), offering the potential to 'bridge social capital' between the religious and the non-religious.

With the above in mind, survey participants were asked how many of their friends held the same religious beliefs to their own. Table 4 shows that whilst 73.8% of religious young people reported half or more of their friends had the same religious beliefs as they did, only 52.6% of non-religious young people said the same. Similarly, a larger proportion of non-religious young people (15.6%) had no friends with the same religious position, compared with their religious peers (3.6%). This indicates that non-religious young people were more likely than religious young people to socialise with those of different beliefs to themselves.

[Insert Table 4 near here]

Respondents were also asked questions about the quality of relations between different religious groups in their school or college. As Amin (2002) points out, just because people from different backgrounds find themselves in close vicinity does not necessarily equate to positive relations. Table 5 shows that all survey participants painted a relatively positive picture in this regard, with 91.6% saying that at least some groups got on well at school or college, and 63% reporting that most or all got on well. However, non-religious young people

were slightly less optimistic about this issue with fewer respondents reporting that ‘most get on’ and ‘all get on’ (56.6%) compared with religious respondents (64.6%).

[Insert Table 5 near here]

Another way in which social cohesion and positive relations can be promoted is through education, such as knowledge and mutual understanding of different religious traditions. Survey respondents were asked to indicate how good their knowledge was of different religions and beliefs. Table 6 shows that 54% of all respondents felt that their knowledge was ‘good’ or ‘very good’, with 33.5% reporting good knowledge for some religions but not for others. However, young people with ‘no religion’ were slightly less confident than religious young people of their knowledge, with 25.5% reporting that this was ‘not very good’ or ‘not at all good’ compared with only 8.6% of their religious peers. Whereas non-religious young people in the YOR survey were more likely to report *interaction* with religious others, they were less likely to report *knowledge* of different religious traditions.

[Insert Table 6 near here]

We also asked respondents about their attitudes towards religion and its impact on individuals and society. In the survey, we presented young people with a number of statements about religion and asked them to indicate how far they believed them to be true. Table 7 shows that non-religious young people were much less likely than religious young people to agree with statements regarding the benefits of religion. Only 28.8% agreed it was always or nearly always true that religion teaches people to help others, 25.6% that religion helps people to know right from wrong and 31.8% that religion helps people to feel part of a

close community. This compared with 71.8%, 71.6% and 66.9% of religious respondents. However, as discussed earlier in the article, there were nevertheless examples of non-religious young people who did recognise potential benefits of religion.

[Insert Table 7 near here]

Table 7 also shows that religious and non-religious young people were less divergent in their views when it came to some of the potential drawbacks of religion. 36.8% of non-religious respondents felt it was always or nearly always true that religion leads to war and conflict, compared with 23.3% of religious respondents, showing a much smaller gap than the positive statements. When it came to 'religion divides communities' and 'religion stops people from thinking for themselves', the results were quite similar for the two groups, with 41.4% and 29.6% of non-religious respondents agreeing the statements were always or nearly always true, compared with 37.9% and 33.7% of religious respondents.

A significant proportion of non-religious young people therefore held negative views about some of the impacts that religion could have on individuals and society, although their numbers were not so different from religious young people, particularly when it came to the potential for religion to divide. However, there was a lot of commitment expressed in the qualitative data for a form of citizenship that we have elsewhere termed 'liberal individualism' (Madge et al., 2014) or the right of everyone to be respected for their beliefs and behaviours, whether religious or non-religious. Indeed, as discussed earlier in the article, some participants felt that a non-religious position made it easier to be open to different views and opinions.

‘It’s something that everybody does need, like some level of knowledge of other religions to avoid like ignorance and conflict in society.’ (KYLIE: female, no religion, religion not at all important)

‘I think it’s fine that people, you know, that I believe what I want to believe, and people believe what they want to believe. I may not agree with it, and they may not agree with what I believe. But it’s okay to have different beliefs.’ (BONO: female, atheist, religion not at all important)

The findings in this section provide some reason to be optimistic about relations between non-religious and religious young people. The survey data highlighted the ability of non-religious young people to socialise with their religious peers and qualitative data reflected a commitment to knowledge about, and respect for others’ religious positions. However, there still seems potential for increasing young people’s knowledge of other religions (e.g. through religious education) and further building on relations between different religious groups in the school context. In the next section, we consider the other side of this equation – how religious ‘nones’ experienced reactions from religious others towards them.

Acceptance and Exclusion

Experiences of acceptance or exclusion can also be important for assessing the state of inter-group relations. The non-religious young people in the qualitative part of our study recounted various individual experiences of others’ reactions to their non-religious identities, linking these with more general perceptions of non-religion within wider society. Some of these experiences were positive, supporting the encouraging survey figures reported in the last

section. Participants spoke of the ways in which many of their peers were generally accepting of them, again reflecting discourses of 'liberal individualism'.

'Even though like I openly say that I have no religion, everyone's still accepting of it. It's not like I've changed. They don't see me differently or anything. So I still feel that I still belong in the same community that I did when I was Sikh, when I did say I had a religion.' (SIENNA: female, atheist, religion important in some ways but not others)

'I think people are well aware that I have no faith [...]. If I don't have a faith it doesn't bother them and if they have a faith then that is fine by me. It really doesn't impact in any kind...' (SYDNEY: male, no religion, religion not at all important)

Participants also discussed wider perceptions of non-religion that they felt contributed to these positive experiences. A strong theme was the impact of change, and the idea that non-religion was becoming more acceptable in contemporary society, partly as a result of secularisation processes. The religiously diverse nature of British society and particular localities was also viewed as helpful for developing acceptance of non-religious difference.

'I think it's becoming more and more acceptable to not follow a specific religion these days. I just think that society is finding that a lot easier' (JOHN S: male, no religion, religion quite important)

'I think mainly in the Newham area and at this age especially in college, I think there's a lot more people, well they're very accepting. They're kind of like, "Okay you're an

atheist, I'm Sikh. Doesn't matter." Because I think there's a lot more mixing.' (EDWARD: male, atheist, religion not at all important)

However, the young people's experiences were not all positive. Certain respondents were unsure what others thought about their non-religious identity, with a few suggesting that their friends probably did not know about it, assuming they were religious due to their cultural background or attendance at a faith school. One participant deliberately kept their non-religious identity to themselves at school to avoid negative reactions from others.

'I spent most of my time in Catholic schools where most people believed in religion and this is when I started to think about myself as agnostic. [...] I obviously keep some parts hidden. [...] I wouldn't give them my beliefs [in RE] because I know that they are probably not as tolerant as I am to people who don't believe in what they believe in. So I would just sit out and lay low most of the time.' (ZEBULON: female, agnostic, religion important in some ways)

Some participants had experienced more negative reactions from those around them or were aware of incidents involving others, including insults, mocking and exclusionary attitudes. Young people from minority cultural backgrounds could encounter certain challenges if non-religious positions were viewed as less acceptable within their communities. A particular concern was the effect that the 'new atheism' was having on perceptions towards non-religion. Respondents felt that people could not always tell the difference between the hard stance taken by proponents such as Richard Dawkins and other softer, more open versions of non-religion. As such, this sometimes led to charges that the non-religious were intolerant of religion and religious people.

'I've been called a devil worshipper before, because I don't believe in God.' (BONO: female, atheist, religion not at all important)

'I would go on [internet] forums and post things and I felt there was more freedom to post what I actually think. [...] People would come up and say "you are just an intolerant person, you can't understand, you don't want to listen to anybody, you need God in your life" and stuff like that.' (ZEBULON: female, agnostic, religion important in some ways)

In the same way as with positive experiences, individual accounts were often situated within wider perceptions of non-religion in society, but in a more negative sense. It was felt that many religious people found it difficult to understand or make sense of non-religion, particularly if their faith was very strong and influenced their life view. The non-religious could also be blamed for wider processes of secularisation and the perceived negative impacts that this could have.

'I think maybe religious people find it a bit almost strange and maybe sometimes insulting and quite, quite shocking. [...] Yes especially if their belief is so strong, because it's almost like you're undermining it and you're saying that there's, you know, there's another way that could be better.' (BONO: female, atheist, religion not at all important)

'Quite often we hear in our class that atheists are sort of at fault for the lack of faith in the country or the kind of diminishing foundations of Christianity. It's almost portrayed as though we are very simplistic kind of "oh you don't have any evidence

and there can't be a god" type of thing. I think atheists are far more than that but that's how it is portrayed' (SYDNEY: male, no religion, religion not at all important)

In summary, the accounts of non-religious young people were quite varied when it came to acceptance and exclusion, but there was significant divergence from reported experiences of discrimination in some of the US research studies. However, all of our respondents were living in urban, multi-faith areas of the UK where religious diversity was difficult to avoid. As such, their personal attitudes and individual experiences were often heavily influenced by the liberal individualism that was a feature of our study more generally (Madge et al., 2014).

Conclusion

In this article, we set out to contribute to the somewhat neglected topic of young people, non-religion and unbelief, by exploring the relationship that religious 'nones' in the YOR study maintained with their wider community and society. As such, the research we have presented speaks to broader debates in youth studies about values, citizenship and community cohesion. We found that young people attached a range of meanings to their non-religious identity, but generally agreed that it provided them with a greater degree of agency in their lives than religion might have. However, they also acknowledged some of the benefits of religion that they could be missing out on. In almost all of the accounts of non-religion presented in our findings, religion maintained a constant presence, used as a comparator to further elucidate what it meant to be a non-religious citizen.

Participants were very keen to argue the distinction between morality and religion, strongly asserting their moral credentials, and providing examples of their contributions to civil

society. However, it was clear that the source of their morality was very different to their religious peers, with parents, school and wider society more important than religious resources, and more emphasis placed on their own moral decision-making. In sum, our findings on morality offer little support to wider discourses that label non-religious young people as lacking in morality. What they do highlight is a key difference in the way that religious and non-religious morals and values are sourced. We would argue that previous research has sometimes been too concerned with ‘measuring’ levels of morality and values between the two groups and in so doing may have missed other important features of non-religious young people’s understanding of morality.

We also explored the issue of relations between non-religious and religious young people, as a key aspect of citizenship. The results in this regard were mixed. There was reason to be optimistic when it came to friendships between non-religious young people and their religious peers, positive relations between groups at school, as well as commitments to respecting others’ religious positions. Similarly, there were examples of non-religious young people who felt accepted in their communities and supported by inclusive attitudes in wider society. However, non-religious young people tended to be less optimistic when reporting on inter-faith relations, less confident of their knowledge of different religions and more critical of the role of religion in society. There were also examples of young religious ‘nones’ who had felt excluded because of their non-religious identity or were aware of wider negative discourses regarding non-religion.

Whilst the findings suggest that non-religious young people in Britain are unlikely to face quite the same challenges as those in other contexts such as the US, this does not mean that their experiences are free from exclusion and discrimination. Viewing non-religion as a

category attracting the same respect and protections that other religious groups do would be a good start in ensuring that all young people feel included and accepted in their communities. This approach could also help in monitoring relations between religious and non-religious groups, something that is likely to become increasingly important in the future to ensure societal cohesion and positive experiences of citizenship.

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Tables

	Not at all important	Not very important	Important in some ways but not others	Quite important	Very important	TOTAL
Religion	243 3.2%	233 3.1%	1059 13.9%	2305 30.3%	3763 49.5%	7603
No religion	203 11%	135 7.3%	444 24.1%	552 29.9%	510 27.7%	1844
Total	446 4.7%	368 3.9%	1503 15.9%	2857 30.2%	4273 45.2%	9447

Table 1: Importance of having a purpose and direction in life (survey data)

	Parents	Scriptures	Teachers	God	Friends	Religious leaders
Religion	6928 88.4%	4838 63.6%	3489 45.7%	5571 74%	4998 65.1%	4279 56.8%
No religion	1587 83.6%	163 9.2%	672 36.4%	188 10.7%	1356 72.3%	130 7.4%

Table 2: 'Quite' or 'very' important influences for helping to decide what is right and wrong (survey data)

	Not affected	Not affected much	Affected in some ways but not others	Affected quite a bit	Affected a lot	TOTAL
Religion	1735 24.3%	738 10.3%	1388 19.4%	1475 20.6%	1815 25.4%	7151
No religion	1317 75.2%	127 7.3%	178 10.2%	72 4.1%	57 3.3%	1751
Total	3052 34.3%	865 9.7%	1566 17.6%	1547 17.4%	1872 21%	8902

Table 3: The extent to which religious beliefs affect treatment of other people (survey data)

	None	A few	About half	Most	All	TOTAL
Religion	277 3.6%	1745 22.7%	1463 19%	3371 43.8%	845 11%	7701
No religion	293 15.6%	594 31.7%	300 16%	561 29.9%	126 6.7%	1874
Total	570 6.0%	2339 24.4%	1763 18.4%	3932 41.1%	971 10.1%	9575

Table 4: Number of friends that have similar beliefs to self (survey data)

	Almost none get on well	Most don't get on well	Some get on well and some don't	Most get on well	All get on well	TOTAL
Religion	228 3.3%	306 4.4%	1923 27.7%	2500 36%	1989 28.6%	6946
No religion	109 6.4%	83 4.9%	550 32.2%	529 30.9%	439 25.7%	1710
Total	337 3.9%	389 4.5%	2473 28.6%	3029 35%	2428 28%	8656

Table 5: How well young people from different religions get on in school or college (survey data)

	Not at all good	Not very good	Good for some religions but not for others	Good	Very good	TOTAL
Religion	191 2.6%	444 6.0%	2361 32.0%	2988 40.5%	1394 18.9%	7378
No religion	218 12.1%	240 13.4%	714 39.8%	443 24.7%	180 10.0%	1795
Total	409 4.5%	684 7.5%	3075 33.5%	3431 37.4%	1574 17.2%	9173

Table 6: Knowledge of different religions and beliefs (survey data)

	Religious identity	Non-religious identity
Religion teaches people to help others	71.8%	28.8%
Religion divides communities	37.9%	41.4%
Religion helps people to know right from wrong	71.6%	25.6%
Religion leads to war and conflict	23.3%	36.8%
Religion helps people to feel part of a close community	66.9%	31.8%
Religion stops people from thinking for themselves	33.7%	29.6%

*Table 7: Views about religion – agreement that statements are always or nearly always true
(survey data)*